

# Thanks for the memories

## The Center was most important midcentury building in PS

**Tracy Conrad** Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Lavish Lady shop specialized in “elegant, youthful fashions sizes 12 ½ to 32 ½ and 38 to 52.” That included dresses, gowns suits, sportswear, lingerie and hosiery. It was located at 174 N. Palm Canyon Drive in Palm Springs, but in its advertisements, it just said, “next to Tee Jay’s Rickshaw.”

Tee Jay’s Rickshaw opened for the 1966 season offering Chinese food. Owned by Thomas J. Brown, an erstwhile machinist with the Standard Oil Co. in Richmond, he served in the Marine Corps from 1944 to 1945. He married immediately after the war and was offering “fabulous brews” well into the early 1970s.

That no other direction or address was required was typical of many small towns. But particularly in the desert, locals and even visitors were familiar with all available venues, as there weren’t too many. Both the Lavish Lady and Tee Jay’s Rickshaw were part of latter incarnations of The Center, or the Town and Country Center.

Much has been written about the Town and Country Center and its architectural importance. Designed by two Los Angeles modernist architects Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones, it is arguably the most important midcentury building in a town known for the style.

Williams was the first African American architect licensed and made a fellow by the American Institute of Architects. Williams was so extraordinarily talented and humble that he would sit across the table from his clients, drawing his ideas upside down.

This tour-de-force demonstration of his spatial and sketching skills was developed during a time when wealthy white clients might not have wanted to sit alongside him. Overcoming all obstacles, Williams would eventually design the iconic theme building for Los Angeles International Airport, dozens of commercial buildings and homes for movie stars.

Jones, upon his discharge from the Navy in 1945, headed home to Los Angeles to establish his architecture practice. Lured to the desert by unique opportunities, he and Williams collaborated on several projects including an addition to the Palm Springs Tennis Club in 1947. Jones would go on to be the dean of the School of Architecture at University of Southern California and in 1966 design Walter and Leonore Annenberg’s Sunnylands Estate in Rancho Mirage.

In 1946, a permit was issued for the site across the street from the Desert Inn, on the east side of Palm Canyon Drive spanning all the way to Indian Canyon Drive. Connecting the two streets through an interior courtyard, The Center, with clean lines, a flat roof and



The gallery in the E.F. Hutton building displayed art.

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The Town and Country Center had a dramatic east façade.

glass walls, was a nod to the International style featuring a sweeping curvilinear overhang on its west side and a dramatic exterior staircase that gave the illusion of being suspended in midair.

Two years later in October of 1948, the Town and Country restaurant at the top of the stairs opened to great fanfare. “Construction and furnishing of which had been underway for many months. Ultra-Modern in design, with a unique architectural and color motif which gives it a sharp individuality, the Town & Country, was created to provide a smart, new intimate rendezvous for Villagers...It will offer the finest cuisine and will feature eastern corn fed steaks and prime ribs, seafoods from the Pacific Northwest, the finest of salads and pastries made in its kitchen which has the most modernly equipped stainless steel fixtures obtainable.”

George Clarke, the president and general manager, first came to Palm Springs in 1938 and a decade later at the restaurant’s opening recalled he “became convin-

ced...that Palm Springs was no longer just a village, but a thriving business community which was bound to become a year-round city.” He pledged: “I am here to spend the rest of my life and will try and contribute everything I can toward helping Palm Springs grow. I know that people want good food and good service and this I will give them in the Town & Country.”

Ten years after that, Clarke would be pictured by the newspaper with the new operator of the restaurant, Oscar Gilbert. The paper wryly titled the caption of his picture “Infrequent Visitor” and quoted him as saying, “A lot of water has flowed under the bridge and this beautiful restaurant has created the flood tide to success.”

In the two decades between the Town and Country and Rickshaw restaurants, there were many different shops surrounding the garden courtyard which delighted tourists intrepid enough to venture down its somewhat obscure entrance.

The many offerings included the Alpenrose Shop, the Christian Science Reading Room, the Desert Sweet Shop, Dorothy’s Beauty Shop, Jewels by Alchian, Kelley’s Furniture, the Myrtlewood Shop, Nelson’s for Men, the Palm Springs Health & Reducing Salon, The Palm Springs News and Printery, Santos Catering Service, the Village Flower Shop, Warren Imports and two different law practices.

Along with those smart shops, the E.F. Hutton Company had offices. This freestanding building, with its gorgeous terrazzo floors and gleaming black exterior panels was repurposed as an art gallery of sorts in the late 1960s.

Much has been made about the plain façade of the project facing Indian Avenue. But its unmistakably architecturally impressive shape rebuts the derogatory commentary.

By the 1960s, styles were becoming more elaborate and Lambides Restaurant embellished the façade in 1964 with an awning and a multi-directional light fixture that made interesting shadow patterns on the face of the building at night.

The father-son enterprise featured Chris Lambides as maitre d and his “black cap chef” dad Harry in an elegant restaurant and cocktail lounge setting (replete with live music) and specializing in Grecian and Continental cuisine.

The preservation fight over The Center is storied and well-documented. Many purveyors and vendors of all sorts have offered their wares and services from this site since it was built. As acolytes of midcentury modern architecture descend on the valley over the coming weeks, the restoration of this venerable building, its next incarnation and inhabitants are highly anticipated.